
A White House panel of independent space experts has raised serious doubts about NASA's plan to revisit the moon, or to send astronauts to Mars. From Washington, our correspondent Jonathan Beale reports:

Five years ago President Bush **set out** his **lofty vision** of sending astronauts back to the Moon by the year 2020. It was meant to be the **staging post** for the **next frontier** - a manned landing on Mars. Now **a panel** of space experts says that's pretty much **pie in the sky**.

Their report, commissioned by President Obama, says the current US human spaceflight programme appears to be **on an unsustainable trajectory**. It suggests the only way forward is to increase the funding of NASA by billions of dollars, or to co-operate with private companies now **embarking** on commercial space flights.

The panel says visits to Near-Earth Objects such as **asteroids** are far more realistic too. The experts also argue for keeping the International Space Station going till 2020, rather than **pulling the plug** in six years' time.

Jonathan Beale, BBC News, Washington

Vocabulary and definitions

set out	displayed or showed plans for
lofty vision	an ambitious plan
staging post	a place where stops are made on long journeys (here, the Moon before travelling on to Mars)
next frontier	a part of space which has not been previously explored
a panel	a team of people (usually professionals or experts) who make decisions
pie in the sky	an expression meaning that something which you hope will happen is, in fact, very unlikely
on an unsustainable trajectory	on a path or following a plan which cannot be continued or completed
embarking	starting on something new
asteroids	one of many rocky objects of various sizes which circle the sun
pulling the plug	prevent from continuing

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